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THE PROBLEM OF MAYDA, AN ISLAND APPEARING ON MEDIEVAL MAPS

By WILLIAM H. BABCOCK

Of all the legendary islands and island names on the medieval maps, Mayda has been the most enduring. The shape of the island has generally approximated a crescent; its site most often has been far west of lower Brittany and more or less nearly southwest of Ireland; the spelling of the name sometimes has varied to Maida, Mayd, Mayde, Asmaida, or Asmayda. The island had other names also earlier and later and between times, but the identity is fairly clear. As a geographical item it is very persistent indeed. Humboldt about 1836 remarked that, out of eleven such islands which he might mention, only two, Mayda and Brazil Rock, maintain themselves on modern charts.¹ In a note he instances the world map of John Purdy of 1834. However, this was not the end; for a relief map published in Chicago and bearing a notice of copyright of 1906 exhibits Mayda. Possibly this is intended to have an educational and historic bearing; but it seems to be shown in simple credulity, a crowning instance of cartographic conservatism.

POSSIBLE ARABIC ORIGIN OF NAME

If Mayda may, therefore, be said to belong in a sense to the twentieth century, it is none the less very old, and the name has sometimes been ascribed to an Arabic origin. Not very long after their conquest of Spain the Moors certainly sailed the eastern Atlantic quite freely and may well have extended their voyages into its middle waters and indefinitely beyond. They named some islands of the Azores, as would appear from Edrisi's treatise and other productions; but these names did not adhere unless in free translation. The name Mayda was not one of those that have come down to us in their writings or on their maps, and its origin remains unexplained. It is unlike all the other names in the sea. Perhaps the Arabic impression is strengthened by the form Asmaidas, under which it appears (this is nearly or quite its first appearance) on the map of the New World in the 1513 edition of Ptolemy (Fig. 1).² But any possible significance vanishes from the prefixed syllable when we find the same map turning Gomera into Agomera, Madeira into Amadera, and Brazil into Obrassil. Evidently this map maker had a fancy for superfluous vowels as

¹ A. von Humboldt: *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent et des progrès de l'astronomie nautique aux quinzième et seizième siècles*, 5 vols., Paris, 1836-39; reference in Vol. 2, p. 163

² Konrad Kretschmer: *Die Entdeckung Amerika's in ihrer Bedeutung für die Geschichte des Weltbildes*, 2 vols. (text and atlas), Berlin, 1892; atlas, Pl. 12, map 1.

a beginning of his island names. He may have been led into it by the common practice of prefixing "I" or the alternative "Y" (meaning *Insula*, *Isola*, *Ilha*, or *Innis*) instead of writing out the word for island in one language or another.

However, there is a recorded Arabic association of this particular island under another name. It had been generally called *Mam* or *Man*, and occasionally other names, for more than a century before it was called *Mayda*. Perhaps the oldest name of all is *Brazir*, by which it appears on the map of 1367 of the Pizigani brothers (Fig. 2),³ a form evidently modified from *Brazil* and shared with the round island of that name then already more than forty years old on the charts. The *Brazir* which we specially have

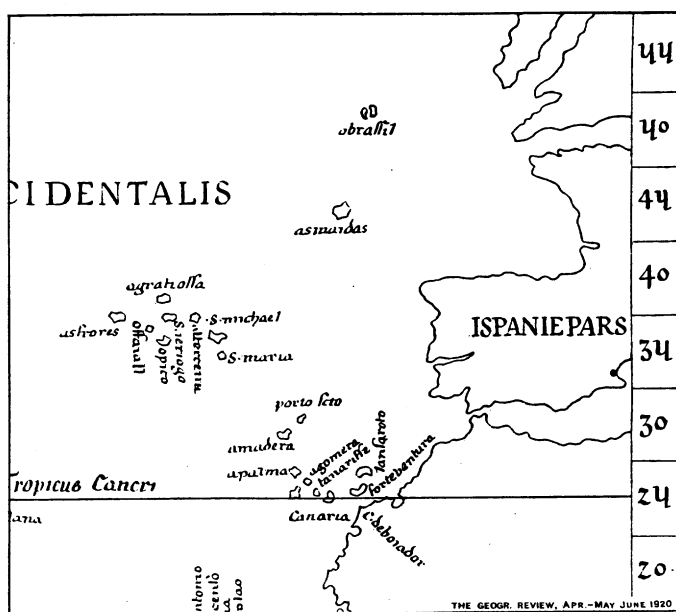


FIG. 1.—Section of the map of the New World in the 1513 edition of Ptolemy showing the islands of Mayda (*asmaidas*) and Brazil (*obrassil*) off the coast of Western Europe. (From Pl. 12, map 1, of Kretschmer's atlas, cited in footnote 2.)

to do with bears roughly and approximately the crescent form, which later became usually more neat and conventionalized under the name *Man* or *Mayda*. It appears south (or rather a little west of south) of the circular *Brazil*, which is, as usual, west of southern Ireland and a little south of west of Limerick. The crescent island is also almost exactly in the latitude of southern Brittany, taking a point a little below the Isle de Sein, which still bears that name. In this position there may be indications of relation

³ [E. F.] Jomard: *Les monuments de la géographie, ou recueil d'anciennes cartes européennes et orientales.... publiés en fac-similé de la grandeur des originaux*, Paris [1842-62], Pl. X, 1.

with both Brittany and Ireland. The former relation is pictorially attested by three Breton ships. One of them is shown returning to the mouth of the Loire. A second has barely escaped from the neighborhood of the fateful island. A third is being drawn down stern foremost by a very aggressive decapod which drags overboard one of the crew; perhaps she has already shattered herself on the rocks, offering the opportunity of such capture in her disabled state. A dragon flies by with another seaman, apparently snatched from the submerging deck. Blurred and confused inscriptions in strange transitional Latin seem to warn us of the special dangers of navigation in this quarter; the staving of holes in ships, the tawny monsters, known to the Arabs, which rise from the depths, the dragons that come flying to devour. The words "Arabe" and "Arabour" are readily decipherable; so is "dragones." Perhaps there is no statement that Arabs have been to that island, for their peculiar experience may belong to some other quarter of the globe; but the verbal association is surely significant. The name Bentusla (Bentufia?) applied to this crescent island by Bianco in his map of 1448⁴ has sometimes been thought to have an Arabic origin; but one would not feel safe in citing this as absolute corroboration. The Breton character of the ships, however, may be gathered (as well as from their direction and behavior) from the barred ensigns which they carry, recalling the barred standard set up at Nantes of Brittany, in Dulcert's map of 1339,⁵ just as the *fleur-de-lis* is planted by him at Paris.

MAYDA AND THE ISLE OF MAN

We have, then, in this fourteenth-century island a direct recorded association with the Arabs, followed long after by what have been thought to be Arabic names. We have also a pictorial and cartographical connection with Brittany and also an indication of relations with Ireland. This last is fortified by its next and, except Mayda, its most lasting name.

The great Catalan map of 1375⁶ (Fig. 3) calls it Mam, which should doubtless be read as Man, for it was common to treat "m" and "n" as interchangeable, no less than "u" and "v" or "i" and "y." Thus Pareto's map of 1455⁷ turns the Latin "hanc" into "hame" and "Aragon" into "Aragom." On some of the early maps, e. g. that of Juan da Napoli (fif-

⁴ Theobald Fischer: *Sammlung mittelalterlicher Welt- und Seekarten italienischen Ursprungs*, 1 vol. of text and 17 portfolios containing photographs of maps, Venice, 1871-86; reference in Portfolio 11 (Facsimile della carta nautica di Andrea Bianco dell'anno 1448), Pl. 3. See also Kretschmer, *op. cit.*, text, p. 184.

⁵ A. E. Nordenskiöld: *Periplus: An Essay on the Early History of Charts and Sailing Directions*, transl. by F. A. Bathér, Stockholm, 1897, Pls. 8 and 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Pl. 11.

⁷ Kretschmer, *Entdeckung Amerika's*, etc., atlas, Pl. 5. (A section of this map, showing the island of Mam in the upper right-hand corner (the name being partly cut off), is reproduced in the *Geogr. Rev.* for February, 1920, Vol. 9, p. 120.—EDIT. NOTE.)

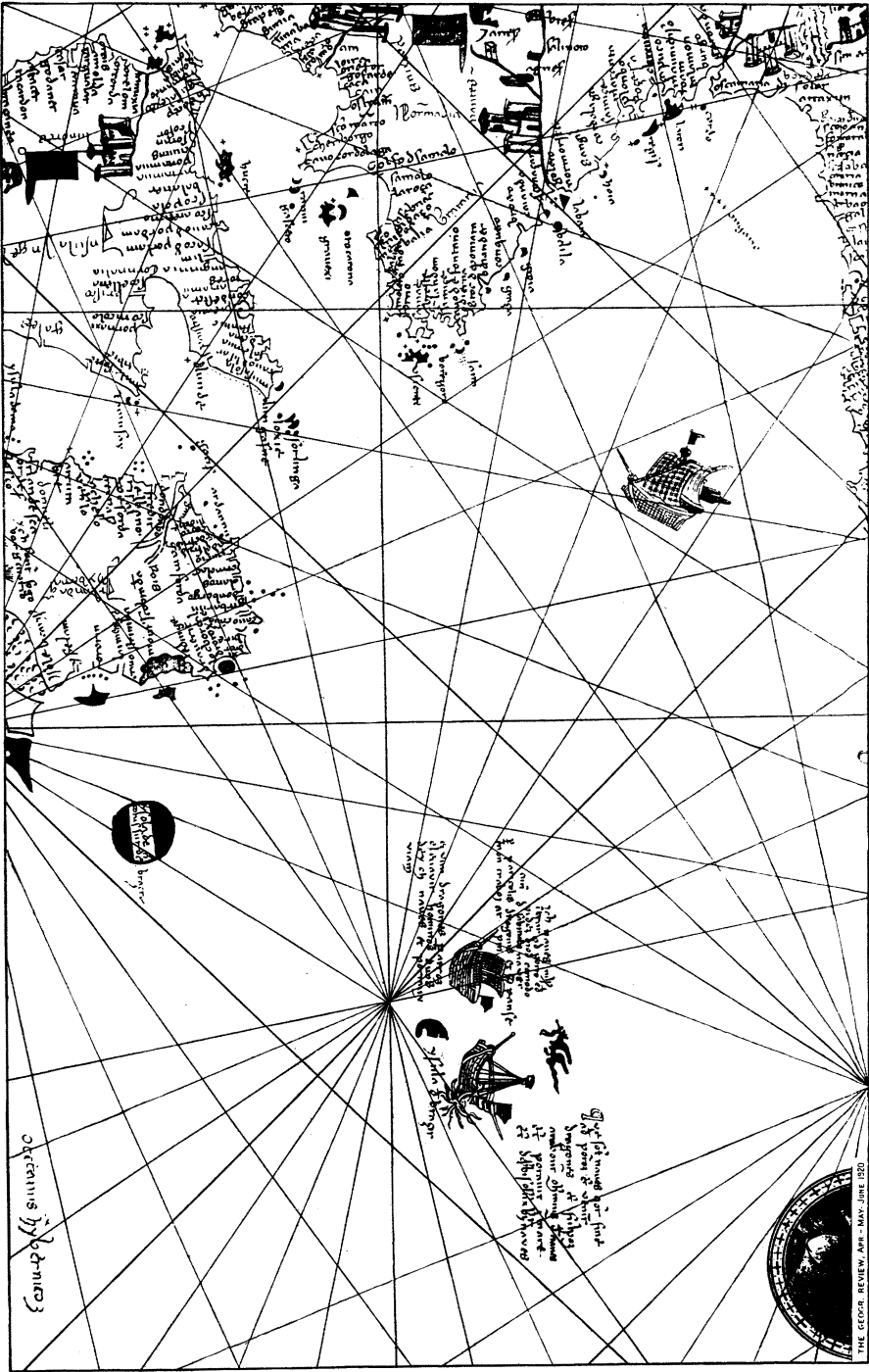


Fig. 2—Section of the map of 1367 of the Pizigani brothers showing the island of Mayda (here called by its earliest name "Brazil") in the latitude of Brittany and the island of Brazil off the coast of Ireland. In the original south is at the top of the map, and in this properly oriented reproduction the inscriptions relating to the islands are inverted. (From Pl. X, 2, of Jomard, cited in footnote 3.)

teenth century),⁸ the proper spelling "Man" is retained, just as it is retained and has been ever since early Celtic days, in the name of the home of "the little Manx nation" in the Irish Sea. That the same name should be carried farther afield and applied to a remote island of the Atlantic Ocean is quite in accordance with the natural course of things and the general experience of mankind. No doubt the name Man might be derived from other sources, but the chances are in this instance that the Irish people whose navigators found Brazil Island (or imagined it, if you please) did the same favor for the crescent-shaped "Man," quite overriding for a hundred years any preceding or competing titles.

Almost immediately there was some competition, for the Pinelli map of 1384⁹ calls it Jonzele (possibly to be read I Onzele, a word which has an Italian look but is of no certain derivation), reducing the delineation of the island to a mere shred, bringing Brazil close to it, and giving the pair a more northern and more inshore location. Another map of about the same period follows this lead, but there the divergence ended. Soleri of 1385¹⁰ reverted to the former representation; and about the opening of the fifteenth century the regular showing of the pair was established—Brazil and Man, circle and crescent, by those names and in approximately the locations and relative position first stated.

It is true that the crescent island is sometimes represented without any name, as though it were well enough known to make a name unnecessary. But during the fifteenth century, when it is called anything, with a bare exception or two, it is called Man. Its shape and general location are substantially those of the Catalan map of 1375 on the maps of Juan da Napoli; Giraldi, 1426;¹¹ Beccario, 1426¹² and 1435;¹³ Bianco, 1436¹⁴ and 1448; Benincasa, 1467¹⁵ and 1482;¹⁶ Roselli, 1468;¹⁷ the Weimar map,

⁸ Listed as No. 17 in Justin Winsor: *The Kohl Collection* (Now in the Library of Congress) of *Maps Relating to America*, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., 1904, p. 27.

⁹ A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Periplus*, Pl. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Pl. 18.

¹¹ Theobald Fischer, *Sammlung*, etc., Portfolio 8 (Facsimile del Portolano di Giacomo Giraldi di Venezia dell'anno 1426).

¹² A section of this map, hitherto unpublished, is shown in the *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 8, 1919, opposite p. 40. The map does not extend far enough north, however, to show the island under discussion. Cf. p. 43 of the same volume.

¹³ Gustavo Uzielli: *Mappamondi, carte nautiche e portolani del medioevo e dei secoli delle grandi scoperte marittime costruiti da italiani o trovati nelle biblioteche d'Italia*, Part II (pp. 280-390) of "Studi Bibliografici e Biografici sulla Storia della Geografia in Italia," published on the occasion of the Second International Geographical Congress, Paris, 1875, by the Società Geografica Italiana, Rome, 1875; reference on Pl. 8 (the second edition, Rome, 1882, does not contain the plates). (For a reproduction of a section see the *Geogr. Rev.* for February, 1920, Vol. 9, p. 116.—EDIT. NOTE.)

¹⁴ A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Periplus*, Pls. 20 and 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Pl. 33.

¹⁶ Kretschmer, *Entdeckung Amerika's*, etc., atlas, Pl. 4, map 1. A section is reproduced in the *Geogr. Rev.* for February, 1920, Vol. 9, p. 121, showing the island (unnamed) in the upper right-hand corner.

¹⁷ E. L. Stevenson: *Facsimiles of Portolan Charts Belonging to the Hispanic Society of America*, *Publs. of the Hispanic Soc. of Amer. No. 104*, New York, 1916, Pl. 2.

(probably) about 1481;¹⁸ Freducci, 1497;¹⁹ and others—arguing surely a robust and confident tradition.

RESUMPTION OF NAME "MAYDA"

On sixteenth-century maps this island is still generally presented, though lacking on those of Ruysch, 1508;²⁰ Coppo, 1528;²¹ and Ribero, 1529;²² but suddenly and almost completely the name Mayda in its various forms takes the place of Man, a substitution quite unaccounted for. There are hardly enough instances of survival of the older name to be worth mentioning. Was there some resuscitation of old records or charts, now

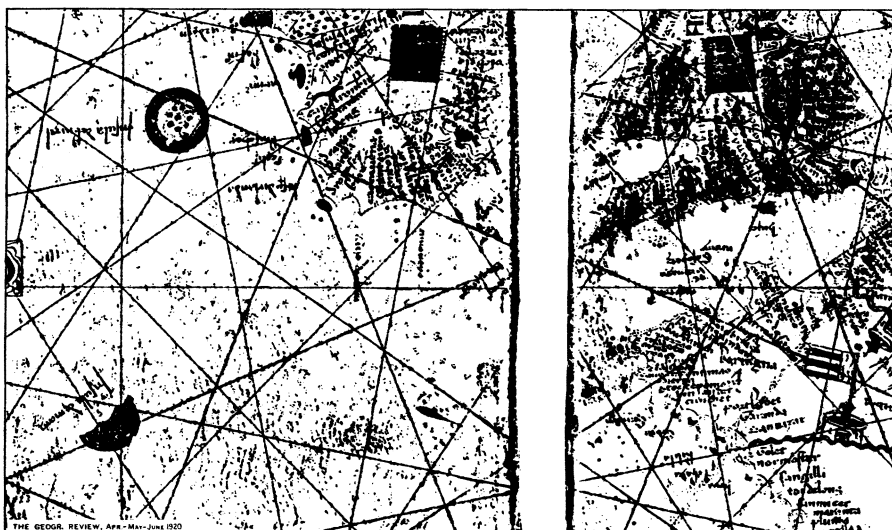


FIG. 3—Section of the Catalan map of 1375 showing the islands of Mayda ("Insula de Mam") and Brazil off the coast of Brittany and Ireland (inscriptions inverted). From Pl. 11 of Nordenskiöld's "Periplus", cited in footnote 5.

lost again, which thus overcame the Celtic claim and supplied an Arabic or at least a quite alien and unusual designation? The little mystery is not likely ever to be cleared up. The previously mentioned map from the Ptolemy edition of 1513, which perhaps first introduces it, also presents several other innovations in departing from the crescent form and shifting the island a degree or two southward; and these changes surely seem to hint at some fresh information. That there was no supposed change of identity

¹⁸ W. H. Babcock: Indications of Visits of White Men to America before Columbus, *Proc. 19th Internat. Congr. of Americanists, Held at Washington, Dec. 27-31, 1915* [Smithsonian Institution], Washington, D. C., 1917, pp. 469-478; map on p. 476.

¹⁹ A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Periplus*, Pl. 22.

²⁰ Kretschmer, *Entdeckung Amerika's*, etc., atlas, Pl. 9, map 3; also in A. E. Nordenskiöld: *Facsimile Atlas to the Early History of Cartography*, Stockholm, 1889, Pl. 32.

²¹ Kretschmer, *Entdeckung Amerika's*, etc., atlas, Pl. 14, map 5.

²² *Ibid.*, Pl. 15.

is shown by the fact that succeeding cartographers down to and beyond the middle of that century revert generally to the established crescent form and to nearly the same place in the ocean previously occupied by Man, while applying the new name Mayda. Thus an anonymous Portuguese map of 1519 or 1520,²³ reproduced by Kretschmer, and the graduated and

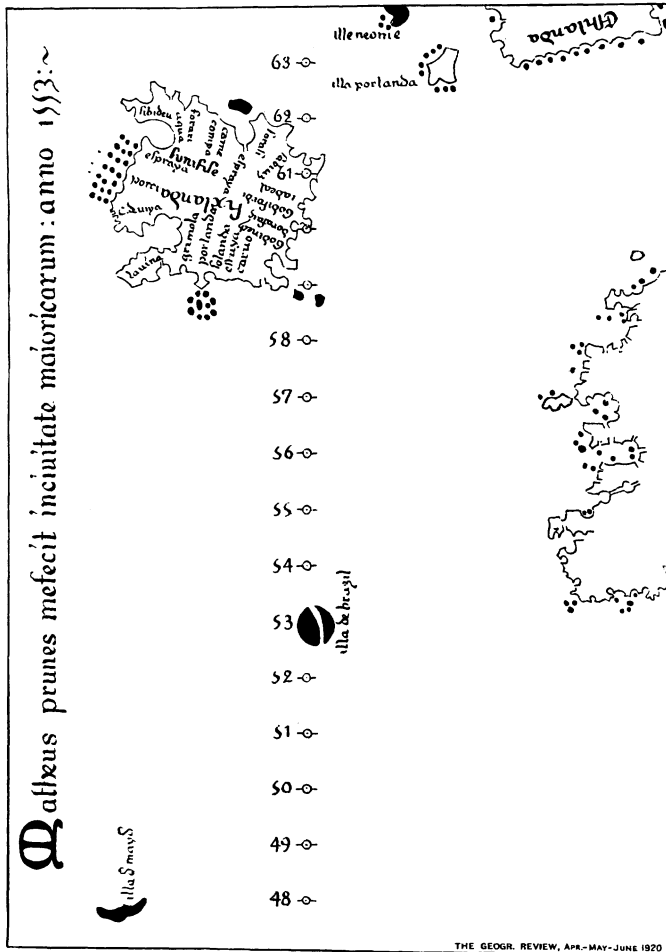


FIG. 4—The Prunes map of 1553 showing Mayda in latitude 48° N., south-west of Ireland. (From Pl. 4, map 5, of Kretschmer's atlas, cited in footnote 2.)

numbered map of Prunes, 1553 (Fig. 4),²⁴ concur in placing Mayda or Mayd at about latitude 48° N., the latitude of Quimper, Brittany, and almost exactly the same as that given by the Pizigani to the crescent island on its first appearance on the maps as a clearly recognizable entity.

²³ *Ibid.*, Pl. 12, map 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Pl. 4, map 5.

TRANSFERENCE OF MAYDA TO AMERICAN WATERS

The maps made after the world had become more or less familiarized with the details of modern discoveries, in this case as in most others of its kind, indicate little except the dying out of old traditions, whatever they may have been, and haphazard or conventional substitution of locations and forms or the influence of the new geographic facts and theories. Thus Desceliers' map of 1546,²⁵ a museum of strangely-named sea islands, makes the latitude of "Maidas" 47° and the longitude that of St. Michaels, but not long afterward Nicolay (1560;²⁶ Fig. 5) and Zaltieri (1566)²⁷ transferred the island to Newfoundland waters. Nicolay calls it "I man orbolunda," and places it just south of the Strait of Belle Isle. It is accompanied by Green Island and by Brazil, a little farther out on the Grand Banks where the Virgin Rocks may still be found at low tide. Taken together these three islands look like parts of a disintegrated Newfoundland. Zaltieri of 1566 gives Maida by that name more nearly the same outward location, though

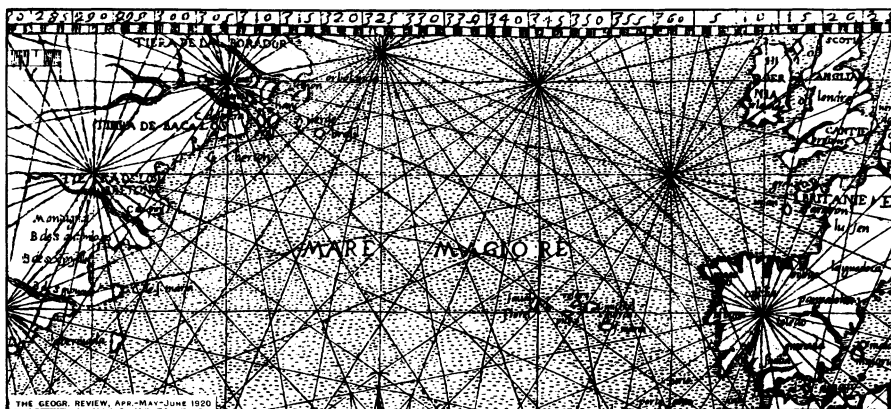


FIG. 5.—Section of the Nicolay map of 1560 showing the islands of Mayda ("I man orbolunda") and Brazil transferred to the waters off the American coast. (From Pl. 27 of Nordenskiöld's "Periplus", cited in footnote 5.)

it is still distinctly American. Nicolay's name "orbolunda" is one of the many puzzling things connected with this island. His "Man" may be either a reversion to the fifteenth-century name, or, more likely, a modification of, or error in copying from Gastaldi's map-illustration²⁸ of Ramusio about ten years previously, which allots the same inclement site to an "isola de demoni" and depicts the little capering devils in wait there for their

²⁵ Kretschmer, *Entdeckung Amerika's*, atlas, Pl. 17; also A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Periplus*, Pl. 51.

²⁶ A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Periplus*, Pl. 27.

²⁷ Kretschmer, *Entdeckung Amerika's*, etc., atlas, Pl. 19, map 3.

²⁸ Justin Winsor: *Cartier to Frontenac: Geographical Discovery in the Interior of North America in its Historical Relations, 1534-1700, with Full Cartographical Illustrations from Contemporary Sources*, Boston and New York, 1894; reference on p. 60.

prey. It is likely, though, that Gastaldi had no thought of identifying it with Mayda. But the neighborhood of the island of Brazil and Green Island seem nearly conclusive evidence that Nicolay intended I Man for Mayda and had ascribed to it, by reason of evil association, the supposed attributes of Gastaldi's island. However, Ramusio himself in 1566,²⁹ the same year as Zaltieri, set his "Man" south of Brazil off the coast of Ireland. The only really important contributions of these maps are their testimony to the continued diabolical reports of Mayda, or Man, and the apparent conviction of Nicolay and Zaltieri that the island was after all American; a

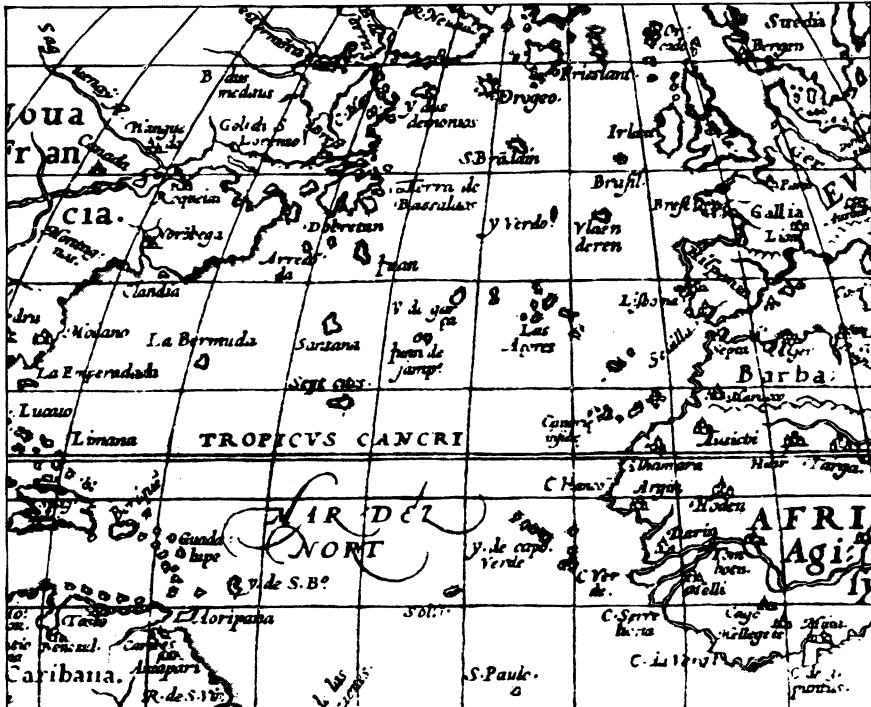


FIG. 6—Section of the Ortelius map of 1570 showing the island of Vlaenderen in the customary location of Mayda off the coast of Brittany. The island of Brazil is unchanged in name and position from the earlier maps. (From Pl. 46 of Nordenskiöld's "Facsimile Atlas", cited in footnote 30.)

suggestion that could have had no meaning and no support in the times when America was unrecognized. Evidently these map makers did not regard the inadequate western longitude of Mayda, or Man, in the older maps as a formidable objection. Presumably they were well aware how many of the insular oceanic distances as shown by these forerunners needed stretching in the light of later discovery. But their views with regard to an American Mayda seem to have ended with them, so far as map representation is concerned.

²⁹ E. A. Nordenskiöld, *Periplus*, Fig. 76, p. 163.

POSSIBLE IDENTITY OF VLAENDEREN ISLAND WITH MAYDA

There is another curious and rather mystifying episodic divergence in the cartography of that period, this time on the part of the great geographers Ortelius and Mercator in their respective series of maps during the latter part of the sixteenth century, for example Ortelius of 1570³⁰ and Mercator of 1569 and 1587.³¹ Ortelius presents as Vlaenderen an oceanic island which certainly seems intended for Mayda (Fig. 6), while Mercator shows Vlaenderen as lying about half-way between Brazil and Maida. The word has a Dutch or Flemish look. Of course there must be some explanation of it, but this is unknown to the writer. The natural inference would be that some skipper of the Low Countries thought he had happened upon it and reported accordingly. This was what occurred in the case of Negra's Rock, now held to be wholly fictitious though shown in many maps; and also in the case of the sunken land of Buss, now generally recognized as real and as a part of Greenland but recorded and delineated in the wrong place by an error of observation. It may be that Ortelius believed in a rediscovery of Mayda and that for some reason it should have the name latest given. But in spite of the prestige of these great names, Vlaenderen did not continue on the maps, while Mayda did, though in a rather capricious way.

PERSISTENCE OF MAYDA ON MAPS DOWN TO THE MODERN PERIOD

There would be little profit in listing the maps of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries which persisted by inertia and convention in the nearly stereotyped delineation of Mayda but, of course, with slight variations in location and name. Thus F. De Witte in 1660 shows "As Maydas" in about the longitude of Madeira and the latitude of Brittany; a French map, unnamed, of 1771 gives "Maida" the longitude of Palma (Canary Islands) and the latitude of Gascony; and a chart of currents by Findlay, 1853, locates "Mayda" in the longitude of Iceland and the latitude of the mouth of the Loire. But these representations have no significance except as to human continuity.

The evil reputation which was early established and seems to have hung about the island in later stages, assimilating the icy clashings and noises and terrors of the north as it had previously incorporated the monstrous fears of a warmer part of the ocean, is surely a curious phenomenon. I have fancied it may be responsible for the probably quite imaginary Devil Rock, which appears in some relatively recent maps, perhaps as a kind of substitute for Mayda, much in the fashion that Brazil Rock took the place

³⁰ A. E. Nordenskiöld: *Facsimile Atlas to the Early History of Geography*, Stockholm, 1889, Pl. 46. A section of this map, showing Vlaenderen, is reproduced in Fig. 6.

³¹ A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Facsimile Atlas*, Pl. 47.

of Brazil Island when belief in the latter became difficult. The present view of the U. S. Hydrographic Office, as expressed on its charts, is that Negra's Rock, Devil Rock, Green Island, or Rock, and all that tribe are unreal "dangers," probably reported as the result of peculiar appearances of the water surface. Whether the possibility has been wholly eliminated of a lance of rock jutting up to the surface from great depths and not yet officially recognized, I will not presume to say; but it seems highly improbable that there is anything of the sort in the North Atlantic Ocean except the lonely and nearly submerged peak of Rockall, some 400 miles west of Britain, and the well-known oceanic groups and archipelagoes.

PROBABLE BASIS OF FACT UNDERLYING THIS LEGENDARY ISLAND

What was this island, then, which held its place in the maps during half a millennium and more, under two chief names and occasional substitutes, designations apparently received from so many different peoples? One cannot easily set it aside as a "peculiar appearance of the surface" or as a mere figment of fancy. But there is nothing westward or southward of the Azores except the Bermudas and the capes and coast islands of America. The identification with some outlying island of the Azores, as Corvo, for example, is an old hypothesis; and the grotesquery of that rocky islet seems to have deeply impressed the minds of early navigators, lending some countenance to the idea. But the Laurenziano map of 1351³² and the Book of the Spanish Friar³³ show that all the islands of the Azores group were known before the middle of the fourteenth century, and Corvo in particular had been given the name which it still holds. Man, afterward Mayda, appears on many maps of the fifteenth century which show also the Azores in full. Perhaps this is not conclusive, for there are strange blunders and duplications on old maps; but it is at least highly significant. If Man, or Mayda, were really Corvo or another island of the Azores group, surely someone would have found it out in the course of the fifteenth or sixteenth century, just as it came to be perceived after a time that the Azores had been located too near to Europe and just as Bianco's duplication of the Azores in 1448 had finally to be rejected. Mayda, if real, must have been something more remote and difficult to determine than Corvo.

Perhaps Nicolay and Zaltieri were right in thinking that Mayda was American, or at least was on the side of the Atlantic toward America. The latitude generally chosen by the maps would then call for Avalon Peninsula,

³² Theobald Fischer, *Sammlung, etc.*, Portfolio 5 (Facsimile del Portolano Laurenziano-Gaddiano dell' anno 1351), Pl. 4.

³³ *Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms, Lands and Lordships That Are in the World, and the Arms and Devices of Each Land and Lordship, or of the Kings and Lords who Possess Them.* Written by a Spanish Franciscan in the middle of the 14th century. Published for the first time with notes by Marcos Jiménez de la Espada in 1877. Translated and edited by Sir Clements Markham. *Hakluyt Soc. Publs.*, 2nd Ser., Vol. 29, London, 1912. Reference on p. 29.

Newfoundland, often supposed to be insular in early days; or perhaps for Cape Breton Island, the next salient land feature. But that is an uncertain reliance, for the observations of pre-Columbian navigators would surely be rather haphazard, and they might naturally judge by similarity of climate. This would justify them in supposing that a region really more southerly lay in the latitude of northern France—for example Cape Cod, which juts out conspicuously and is curved and almost insular. Or by going farther south, although nearer Europe, they might thus indicate the Bermudas, the main island of which is given a crescent form on several relatively late maps. But we must not lay too much stress on this last item, for divers other map islands were modeled on this plan. We may be justified, then, in saying that Mayda was probably west of the middle of the Atlantic and that Bermuda, Cape Cod, or Cape Breton is as likely a candidate for identification as we can name.